



**For Immediate Release**  
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## **WorkFirst Successful Despite Slow Economy**

OLYMPIA – WorkFirst helped nearly 28,600 people enter the labor force in 2002, demonstrating that the state’s welfare reform program is effective even during a recession, said state officials.

For many, those jobs were the trigger to help them leave public assistance.

“WorkFirst is an incredible success story,” Gov. Gary Locke said. “Even in these tough times, WorkFirst is able to bring business, government, education and people in need together. The result is a program that benefits all of us.”

WorkFirst has had to contend with an economy that is very different from the early years of welfare reform.

“Washington, more so than many other parts of the nation, has struggled with high unemployment,” said Marc Baldwin, head of the Washington State Employment Security Department’s Office of Policy and Research. “Yet, WorkFirst has continued to move people off of assistance and into the workforce. The program’s results have held steady during this slump because we’ve focused on helping clients take advantage of the best opportunities available in the current job market.”

Under WorkFirst, the number of Washington families on welfare consistently declined until early 2001. Since then, despite some expected seasonal swings, the caseload has remained essentially flat. The latest figures from November 2002 show 52,691 people were receiving welfare – a 45 percent drop since January 1997.

Welfare recipients who went to work in 2002 added an estimated \$198 million in earnings to the state’s economy.

National statistics also demonstrate that welfare reform’s success is not dependent on a strong economy. A recent U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report showed that the number of welfare recipients in the country declined by 267,000 between December 2001 and June 2002, while the number of families on welfare dropped by 75,000. These reflect declines of 5.1 percent and 3.6 percent, respectively.

WorkFirst officials attribute Washington’s success to a combination of factors, including the program’s focus on meeting the needs of employers, as well as clients.

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“WorkFirst has been most successful when we match employer needs with the right workers,” Baldwin said. “We identify growing job sectors, build partnerships with businesses, and work with our state community colleges to develop training programs that close the skills gap by preparing low-income parents to succeed at those jobs.”

Tens of thousands of Washington employers have hired WorkFirst participants. Many did so unknowingly; they hired a qualified candidate who happened to come from the WorkFirst rolls.

Other employers intentionally sought out the advantages of hiring through WorkFirst, which include free applicant screening and job matching services, tax credits, and support services for employees such as subsidized training, child care and transportation.

“Our WorkFirst workers are hardworking, dedicated employees – good people to have in our company,” said Liza Romero, human resources director for the WestCoast Hotel in Pasco. The hotel was among nearly 70 Washington businesses recognized by Gov. Gary Locke at a November ceremony for contributing to the success of WorkFirst.

Like any other job seekers, WorkFirst participants can become discouraged when job openings are scarce. WorkFirst officials say motivating clients has been critical to the program’s success.

“We have not given up on the promise of WorkFirst just because the economy is in a slowdown,” said Mike Masten, head of the Department of Social and Health Services’ Community Services Division. “It is too important to the families for whom this program represents hope, opportunity and upward mobility. We continue to do all we can to engage and encourage clients, despite what they’ve heard about the job market.”

WorkFirst provides a comprehensive array of support services to help families succeed.

“Once parents go to work, even part-time, they are assured of having more income than if they relied on welfare alone,” said Victor Vasquez, director of the Employment Security Department’s WorkFirst program. “They also become eligible for benefits such as free job training, subsidized child care, and staff to assist them in getting better jobs that lead to self-sufficiency. The previous welfare system didn’t offer enough incentives or support to go to work, particularly child care.”

For parents who have left welfare for work thanks to WorkFirst, the past year has special meaning. Most are enjoying a holiday season with more resources to support their families and new hope for the future.

Sharon Jones is one of them. Not long ago, she was homeless and on welfare. Today, Jones has a job she loves with the City of Seattle, and she and her children are enjoying the holidays in their apartment.

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“As my family and I reminisce over the past years, we realize how much has changed. I am very pleased with where I am and the success I have attained through WorkFirst,” Jones said. “I recently bought a car. Not a Cadillac, but a pretty good car for a good price.”

“The holidays are great this year,” she added. “I had a wonderful time shopping for gifts for the kids. After dinner, we turn the lights down and just ‘ah’ over how beautiful the Christmas tree is. We included lots of angels representing all those who supported us through our struggles and success.”

Jones’ inspirational success story can be read on the WorkFirst Web site at <http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/>.

Four state agencies administer WorkFirst: Employment Security Department; Department of Social and Health Services; Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development; and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

For more information about WorkFirst, visit the WorkFirst Web site at <http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/>.

For a list of WorkFirst businesses that received recognition from Gov. Locke, see <http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/reporter/bizindex11-20-02.htm>.

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